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On not being noticed: intellectual disabilities and the non-vocal register

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## On not being noticed: intellectual disabilities and the non-vocal register

## Abstract

Gestures unaccompanied by sound risk not being registered by their intended recipient. We chart examples of this in a video recording of a meeting between people with intellectual disabilities and support staff in a group home. The recordings reveal that even individuals with very limited spoken language can, and do, design non-vocal gestures to make intelligible contributions to the conversation as it is unfolding. But they are often unseen. Were such contributions to be noticed and taken up, we argue, they would reveal a variety of substantive contributions to the interaction, notably residents' concerns to display their understanding of the current topic and its interactional requirements, for themselves and others. We consider whether, and how, such unratified contributions may arise out of a dilemma faced by staff, and manifest a diminished identity that staff members (and researchers) unwittingly impose on residents.

## On not being noticed: intellectual disabilities and the non-vocal register

This paper examines non-verbal communication in a house meeting for people with intellectual disabilities, some of whom have very limited spoken language. We illustrate that if research attention is focused exclusively on what goes on verbally, some significant fraction of what goes on may be missed, and this may have unsuspected implications for how we see the identities of the actors, and the extent to which they can exert influence over what goes on around them.

In many branches of the social sciences, especially those with a respect for the use of language in interaction, video analysis has been increasingly used to pay attention to non-spoken, visual elements under the interactants' communicative control (see, for example, Goodwin, 1995, 2000a & b, 2003; Heath, 1986; Heath and Luff, 1992, Mondada 2003). What the accumulation of multi-media work tells us is that when we miss these contributions, we risk missing an important channel through which people initiate, comment on, or otherwise contribute to the interaction, soberly or playfully – and, in the context of policy initiatives which stress empowerment and independence, we may miss a channel in which people with intellectual disabilities act as autonomous contributors to the social life of the local community. Since most of the verbal interactions in the meeting analysed in this paper revolve around the staff directing questions to the residents, restricting focus on what goes on verbally has the danger of leading us to see the residents in diminished terms, that is, we see their contributions as reactive, dependent and lacking in spontaneity.

This is not primarily an analyst's problem, however. Discourse analysts' historical (though changing) tendency to set more store by speech and text than gesture and movement is, more importantly, found in the way staff interact with those they support. Even in settings where people with intellectual disabilities appear to have limited abilities to understand or answer speech, we still see staff talking their way through activities with service-users (Bradshaw, 2001; Houghton, Bronicki, & Guess, 1987; McConkey, Morris & Purcell, 1999). In settings where people with intellectual disabilities use a mixture of speech and gestures, our observations in a variety of residential services have shown that there is a tendency to privilege the verbal, to value verbal utterances more highly than non-verbal, and to notice verbal behaviours more readily than gestures. While this is not invariably the case, since

many non-verbal contributions are indeed acknowledged, it is nevertheless often seen for three reasons.

Firstly, noticing non-verbal contributions unaccompanied by speech or sound requires visual attention, and in group homes, for example, there may be a distracting number of people present in any episode. Secondly, even if noticed, non-verbal contributions may not be clear in their meaning, even after staff attempts at clarification (Edge, 2001; Grove, Bunning, Porter & Olsson, 1999; Harris, 2003; Jenkinson, 1993; Puddicombe, 1995; for examples of the difficulties in clarifying the pointing gestures of a person with aphasia, see Goodwin, 2000). Thirdly, and exacerbating the first two reasons, the staff member involved in the interaction may well be facing a dilemma (Beamer & Brooks, 2001; Jenkinson et al, 1992; Antaki, Finlay, Sheridan, Jingree & Walton, 2006). They may have institutional demands on their time which compete with the need to give attention to possibly subtle and obscure gestures (Houghton et al, 1987). The staff member may therefore have good organisational reasons for failing to register residents' attempts at communication, whether these attempts are clear in their meaning or not. But whichever of these three reasons are in play, the question can be asked - what happens when a gesture is overlooked?

### *Conversation Analysis as an appropriate method*

What sort of research will help to illuminate what happens when people overlook or fail to register their fellow-conversationalists' gestures? Certain popular methodologies are seemingly disqualified at first sight: one cannot interview informants, nor administer questionnaires, nor inspect documentary records (the three most popular research methods in the social sciences) when what is in question is precisely something not-noticed in the first place. So seeing what the staff do has to be researched in some other way. Can we not interview the people being not-noticed? Possibly; but people's retrospections are suspect in general, and, if what they are asked to remember is fleeting and perhaps unconscious, are likely to produce merely guesswork - if any answer at all. What, then, can we do?

While most studies of meetings involving people with intellectual disabilities use audio recordings (e.g. Antaki et al, 2006; Jingree, Finlay & Antaki, 2006) or participant observation and interviews (e.g. Alexander & Hegarty, 2001; Carnaby, Lewis, Martin, Naylor & Stewart, 2003; Goodley, 2000; Hagner, Helm &

Butterworth, 1996), the method we need is one that is alive to the moment-by-moment unfolding of the interaction between staff member and resident, and not reliant either on potentially faulty memory, or on the inevitably incomplete record even of the best note-taker. We need an objective recording which we can inspect closely and repeatedly, to explicate both the vocal sequence of interaction and its complementary, or independent, non-vocal element. The method we propose using is Conversation Analysis (henceforth, CA), which has an elaborate conceptual apparatus for uncovering social action as it is achieved through the medium of talk in interaction.

It is worth distinguishing CA from other forms of discourse analysis in: its data; its methods; and its theoretical commitments. (For a sense of CA's beginnings, see Sacks, (1992); for overviews of its methods and style, see Hutchby and Wooffitt, (1998), and for a practical guide to its methods, ten Have, 1999). CA works from audio and video records of the scene as it played out, arguing that these, although imperfect, are the closest representation we can have which will allow for the repeated hearings and viewings that are crucial to tease out the subtle practices of everyday action. It does not impose codes or categories on what it sees (unlike, say, a Bales-type analysis of interaction; for a comparison of Bales' classic *Interaction Process Analysis*, on the one hand, as an exemplar of how to impose categories on the free flow of interaction, and CA, on the other, see Peräkylä, 2004). Rather, it tracks the participants' organisation of their turns-at-talk to see how they bring off the business at hand. Such organisation is subtle, flexible, and though resisting the application of broad-brush coding schemes, is amenable to an analysis of its synchronized workings. Above all of these matters of data and practice, Conversation Analysis' theoretical commitment has, for us, the attractive ethnomethodological injunction to stay close to the local meaning of the proceedings: that is to say, to let the participants in the scene determine what they mean, by their visible display and their visible uptake (or, as we shall see, non-uptake) of each others' turns.

In all this, CA departs from other forms of discourse analysis, which are variously text-based, interview-driven, reliant on analysts' prior theoretical orientation (in, for example, the application of categories into which to code data) and silent about the onward development of interaction as it unfolds in sequence (for a critical comparison of CA and other forms of discourse analysis, see Wooffitt, 2006, and Antaki (forthcoming)). All of these are suitable for some research questions, but not,

we think, in our project here, which must be anchored in a capture of what actually happened, and be analysed as its organisation plays out in real time.

A further word is in order about a piece of inspiring research that shares CA's ethnomethodological commitment to local meaning, but realises it differently: David Goode's classic *A World Without Words* (Goode, 1994). Readers will find, in its pages, a social scientist whose method of working is to immerse himself as far as is possible in the world of his research subject (though such a term is inappropriately cool, given the warmth and intimacy of Goode's engagement with the deaf and blind children he studies). Cleaving closely to ethnomethodology's roots in Garfinkel's programme (Garfinkel, 1967), Goode tries to share the children's "form of life" in all its apparent insularity and deviation from "normal" standards of propriety, hygiene, and communal responsibility. By doing so he hopes to find a way of understanding and describing, to an academic audience, the children's own ethno-methods, or indigenous sense-making practices. He wants to give, as it were, an "inside-out" perspective, from which vantage point the children's (apparently maladaptive and deficient) habits make sense.

There is, however, a profound difference between Goode's realisation of the ethnomethodological project, and CA's; though both insist on the uncovering of local meaning, CA does so by the capture of events on audio or video, and inspecting just those records for their structural, turn-taking organisation; whereas, in keeping with what has now become a different tradition, Goode's procedure is determinedly more catholic, allowing (indeed mandating) a personal immersion into the world of his subjects, both as ethnographic participant-observer and, ideally, as a sharer of their inner, subjective world-view. This we do not aspire to. Although the reader will see images of our research participants (those with and without an intellectual impairment), and see transcriptions of their words, we do not claim to have been able to share their perspective; our aim is, more modestly, to reproduce their actions and see how they navigate their world as a matter of visible and public engagement.

### *Conversation Analysis and Intellectual Disability*

The great bulk of what CA has found out about people's organisation of their turns at talk has been based on people without a diagnosis of intellectual impairment, so it is fair to ask whether its insights are reasonably applicable when we turn to interactions involving people with intellectual impairments of various degrees of

severity. The question was posed in two studies in the eighties, and the results showed that people with quite profound impairments could and did organise their part in an interaction according to the rules and conventions of "ordinary" speakers - they themselves were (apart from problems in memory, vocabulary and reasoning power) quite indistinguishably "ordinary" in their take up of turns, their tracking of others' turns, their distinctions between questions, imperatives and other, still subtler conversational acts; their use and understanding of pauses, intonation, emphasis, overlap, and many other such features of the design of turns at talk (Yearley and Brewer, 1989; Wooton 1989).

Since then, CA has been used productively to study the engagement of people with intellectual disabilities in clinical assessment and service evaluation (e.g. Antaki, 2001; Antaki, Young & Finlay, 2002; Rapley & Antaki, 1996), the manner in which they manage their identities in interviews (e.g. Rapley, Kiernan and Antaki, 1998), their contributions to service-user meetings (e.g. Antaki et al, 2006; Jingree et al, 2006), the interactional production of 'incompetence' and 'acquiescence' (and resistance to this – Rapley, 2004) and the ways in which service-user identities are connected to staff identities in case worker consultations (Wareing and Newell, 2005), among other topics.

Taking a conversation analytic perspective on this data, then, we shall be able to examine interactional details of what happens from moment-to-moment, and particularly how contributions are formatted and how the actors treat (or fail to treat) each others' turns. CA is sensitive both to how utterances (e.g. questions and statements) are responded to or assessed by recipients, and also, as we shall see in this paper, how utterances are not actually oriented to at all. Our analysis will offer interpretations of how these unratified gestures - those gestures not taken up or acknowledged - might have been dealt with by members of staff, but were not; and the implications that this has for the identities of the residents. We shall try to give evidence for our proposition that analysts' (and more importantly, staff members') concentration on vocal language can lead us to miss both indications of interactional competence and important *potential* aspects of the residents' identity as it plays out in interaction. Were they noticed more consistently, they would lead us to a more respectful understanding of both the competencies and the identities of the actors concerned.

## Method

### *Overview*

We closely examine seven videotaped episodes from a residents' meeting chaired by a staff member. These meetings are held on a monthly basis to evaluate and determine the program of activities in which the residents participate. In the first six cases the aim is to reveal residents' meaningful gestural contributions unnoticed by the staff. The analysis is qualitative, based on a close inspection of the exact timing and design of utterances and gestures, applying the conceptual apparatus of Conversation Analysis (for an account of which, see above). In the last case that we analyse, we demonstrate how positive it can be when such gestures are indeed taken up. The recordings were part of a nine month study of several residential services for people with intellectual disabilities in the UK, involving both ethnographic observations and video recordings. Although examples are presented here from one meeting, similar occurrences involving the same residents were observed in other formal meetings in the service in question.

### *Data*

The data for this paper comes from a video-recording of a 'house meeting' in a group home for five men with intellectual disabilities. Each of these men has been in receipt of residential care services for at least 30 years. All had been residents of the same institutional hospital, though they were not necessarily on the same ward. In the late 1990s, with the dissolution of the institutional hospitals, they moved into their present home; thus they have almost a ten-year history as a group. The history of their relationships with members of the staff team varies. One member of staff has been working with some of the residents for 17 years, though most members of the staff team have been with the residents for between 7 and 4 years. In all cases, except Dom, the residents' files communicate only that each is diagnosed as having 'Learning Disabilities' (this label has the same meaning in the UK as 'intellectual disabilities' and 'mental retardation' in other countries); Dom's file communicates the he is diagnosed as having 'Learning Disabilities and Down's Syndrome'. All the residents require some level of support from members of staff to engage in activities ranging from intimate care, to cooking, to accessing services and resources in the community. Further, they all require support from members of staff to communicate their needs and wishes to members of their wider community, e.g., when shopping or



when buying a drink in a local pub. No other, more detailed, clinical information, for example measures of the verbal or cognitive abilities of the residents, was available to the researchers. In order to further contextualize the data, we briefly describe the normal communicative practices of each of the residents, as established by fieldwork in the months preceding the recordings (*n.b.* all names are pseudonyms):

Alec communicates frequently within the vocal register. His speech is however idiosyncratic with most utterances being formulated as questions. This pattern even applies to situations where Alec is aiming to impart information.

Dom is capable of communicating vocally, though his speech is indistinct and not readily understandable. Consequently, Dom makes regular use of signs, many of which are idiosyncratic and require a familiar audience. Dom often uses signs to the exclusion of vocal speech and is often prompted to speak in order for him to be understood.

Henry is able to communicate vocally. He tends to wait for others to initiate vocal interactions, affording him the possibility of responding in limited terms, often just echoing the appropriate word or short phrase necessary to communicate (dis)agreement. Henry will often direct the attention of others to physical objects in order for the meaning of ambiguous utterances to be more fully understood.

Victor is capable of communicating vocally and of using full sentences. His speech is, however, at a very low volume, often to the extent of being inaudible to others. He therefore makes extensive use of non-verbal behaviours such as facial expressions and gestures.

Oliver is capable of communicating vocally. Although he is capable of using full sentences he tends to use short phrases or single words.

### *Scene*

The meeting lasts for just over 16 minutes. Seated around a dining table were the five residents (Dominic, Alec, Henry, Oliver and Victor), two staff members (Dave and Brenda) and Chris, the researcher. Dave, a staff member, chaired the meeting. He was sitting next to Oliver and Alec. He read out the minutes and then went through the agenda items. For items of information, Dave explained them and then checked each person understood. Where there were decisions to be made about future activities, Dave described the activities and then asked each resident in turn. Dave also recorded the decisions made in a book. All the official business of the

meeting, then, was initiated by Dave and passed through him. During this activity, Alec, one of the residents, frequently addressed Chris, and so there are often two conversations going on, one between Dave and the resident he is addressing, the other between Alec and Chris.

The still photograph in Figure 1 blurs the participants' faces, but gives a sense of the general scene. We shall augment the text with images twice more, when it is particularly useful to see the gesture. In most episodes, however, we shall not present photos for reasons of space.

[----- figure 1 about here -----]

### *Transcription*

The transcription system used here attempts to record both what happens verbally and non-verbally. It should be noted that, of course, no transcription system can hope to capture everything in the visual scene (see Goodwin, 2000c, for a discussion on the limits of transcription). We recognise that although the transcriptions the reader will encounter below look complex, they are nevertheless significant simplifications of the scene as it actually happened. We have chosen not to notate fine details of gaze, posture and body-movement. Instead we emphasise the particular aspect of the visual scene that interests us, namely unratified gestures (that is, those which are not taken up in any observable way). To ease an accessible discussion of what is going on in the gestures, we have described arm and hand-movements in common-sense terms (e.g. 'makes cycling motion with hands'), rather than use the technical apparatus of such advanced systems as those of Kendon (see his discussion of the issues involved in Kendon, 1997). The notation conventions are in the Appendix.

## Analysis

### *Selection of episodes*

The meeting is full of occasions on which residents pointed, nodded, shook their heads, shrugged, and smiled, as well as simulating activities with their hands and arms such as drinking, pedalling, spinning a record and flying. We have collected below episodes in which a resident made a gesture which, had it been responded to, might have elicited from members of staff an orientation to the person's positive qualities.

Among those qualities are those of being helpful, jocular, altruistic, interactionally more autonomous, self-directed and competent. We shall describe seven such episodes, from two residents who are largely non-vocal (Dom and Henry; see the descriptions above).

It is worth recalling that, from the point of view of the staff members in the interaction, the dilemma in each episode is the same: to invest time in registering, or seeking to register, these non-vocal gestures and so recognise and appreciate residents' contributions; or, on the other hand, to pursue the business at hand with despatch.

*Episode 1: Henry: helping to answer a question*

The following example takes place over approximately fifteen seconds. The chair (Dave) is showing the residents some picture books which are intended to help the residents communicate about medical problems. At the beginning of the extract, Dave and Brenda are talking to Oliver, who is sitting between them. They are pointing to pictures and discussing them. Henry is on the opposite side of the table, next to Chris (the researcher). The most salient one to note is the use of square brackets to identify points at which there is overlap in talk (or gesture). For example, at lines 6 and 7 below, Henry's hand moves away from his cup while Dave is finishing off saying *one of those?*.

Extract 1: VD03 1.58. "Glasses"

- 1 Oliver ((points to book and looks at Alec)) gla:ss°es°,
- 2 Dave glasses, >there you go<, ((points to book, body oriented
- 3 towards Oliver)) gla:sses, whassat one. (1.0) who has one
- 4 of those, ((looks up at Oliver then back to book, still pointing
- 5 at picture)) (.) >who's got [one: of those?:
- 6 Henry [((hand moves from cup, then
- 7 hesitates))
- 8 Dave ((still pointing at book, body oriented to Oliver))=your brother, (.)
- 9 Brenda [°hearing aid°.
- 10 Henry [((hand reaches in pocket))
- 11 (1.0)



would be, in those circumstances, understandable as his own version of a prompt to Oliver: *this is what Dave is talking about*. That would show Henry's appreciation of a number of things, which we set out here rather laboriously (we shall not make this sort of explicit list in later analyses, where it would be otiose):

- (a) that Oliver is not understanding something about the question that the staff member has posed him;
- (b) that a possible cause of his failure is the medium of representation - Oliver may not fully understand the photograph or picture as it appears in the book;
- (c) that if this is the case, then Henry can unilaterally step in and help; and
- (d) Oliver's problem can be fixed by the prompt of an actual and familiar representation of the object, namely Henry's own glasses.

Because of the camera angle, it is hard to make out where Henry's gaze is directed when he makes these actions – it could be either towards Dave or Oliver. If these actions are oriented towards Dave rather than Oliver, there is another possibility as to what is happening here: Henry might be seen as answering Dave's question '*Who's got one of those?*' It is relevant here that he begins to move his hand immediately after this question, and before Dave has suggested the answer '*your brother*'. An alternative gloss, then, is that by producing his own glasses for Dave he is in effect saying '*I do*'.

In other words, were Henry's gesture to be ratified, it could be hailed as a helpful, if discreet, diagnosis and treatment of a fellow-member's problem, or as an answer to a question that went unanswered. However, neither staff member (Dave or Brenda) registers it. Chris, the researcher, does register it (line 11: *you got yours in your pocket?*), but in a way that acknowledges only that Henry has recognised glasses as the current topic. That Henry's non-verbal actions with his glasses extend beyond Chris's comment suggests that Henry's aim was not merely to show that he knew what was being talked about, and further supports the interpretation of this action as designed to be helpful. But now consider it from Dave's point of view. He is chairing the meeting, so the official business (reading out minutes, going through the agenda, ensuring turn-taking) all goes through him. He has finished the glasses item and turned to a new one. At this point - as we shall see throughout all our extracts and pervasively as he fulfils his institutional duties - he is faced with the dilemma of either pressing on with this agenda item (among many) or monitoring and reacting to non-

agenda business. His choice, at this point, is to proceed with the agenda; and, at this point, Henry's contribution is missed.

*Episode 2: Henry: augmenting Dave's words with a gesture*

In this episode, Dave is checking whether all residents are happy with the meeting being video-recorded.

Extract 2: VD03 5.38. "Video"

- 1 Dave ((nods)) Yeah.
- 2 [ (1.0) ]
- 3 Dave [(turns and points at Dom)]
- 4 Dave Still happy, ((nods once)) with the video, ((pointing at video
- 5 camera above and behind Dom and giving it a brief glance ))
- 6 [ .8 ]
- 7 Dom [ ((nods minimally) ]
- 8 Dave ((turns to Alec)) you still happy with °the video°
- 9 Henry ((turns head to camera, begins to raise hand))
- 10 Alec er ye [ah.
- 11 Dave [((turns away from Alec and looks down towards his book
- 12 Henry [((looks fully at camera, raises hand and points at it while
- 13 looking at it))
- 14 Dave ((not registering Henry's action)) yep.
- 15 Henry ((puts hand down and looks first at Dave, who is looking at book,
- 16 then looks at [Chris))
- 17 Chris [((to Henry)) is [that all right?
- 18 Dave [((still looking down)) right
- 19 Henry yea::h.

We join at the point where Dave's question is directed to Alec, who is sitting next to him. Henry is watching them. Dave has gone round the table asking each resident in turn whether they are happy with the video recording, using a 'no problem' format common in surveys (Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000). Alec is the last to be asked. In the previous sequence, Dave has pointed at the camera when asking Dom if he was 'still happy with the video'. Here we see that overlapping the exchanges between Alec

and Dave, Henry turns and points to the camera (beginning just after Dave uses the word 'video'). However, nobody is looking at him and so this contribution goes unnoticed. Henry's gesture is formatted similarly to Dave's in the first turn, in which presumably the pointing was used to clarify the verbal question. If noticed, it might function in this way. However, it is not a staff member who registers any of this; it is the researcher, Chris, who is free of institutional obligations. It is he who now notices Henry's orientation as an initiator, and asks him 'Is that all right?'

At this point it is important to raise a question which will occur to the reader: why make so much of the staff member not noticing what the resident does - after all, it might be observed, the staff member has other things in play, and can't monitor everything. We are familiar with workaday group meetings, at which many gestures (and indeed spoken turns) pass unremarked. That is a fair point. It is indeed a dilemma for any chair; whether to progress the institutional demands of the meeting's agenda on the one hand, and hear out the participants on the other. Our point here, however, is that the institutional imperative of a residence for people with intellectual impairment seems - on the face of it, as it is enshrined in policy document, mission statements and so on - to privilege the latter over the former: to take (extra) care in respecting residents' attempts to overcome their impairments in communication.

*Episode 3: Dominic: possible on-topic correction missed*

Let us now turn to another resident, Dominic. In the following episode, Dave is going round the table soliciting individual replies to a given agenda item. On this occasion he is asking residents about whether they want to go cycling. Victor and Oliver have already given their responses.

Extract 3: VD03 5.54: "Cycling"

- 1 Dave ((to Alec)) still want to go cycling e[very week?
- 2 Alec [er=yeah::
- 3 Dave ((looking at Dom, head inclined back, eyebrows raised)) still wannu
- 4 go and see Jackie ((brings head level)) every week?
- 5 [ (4.0 silence until line 10 ]
- 6 Dom [((points at [Brenda]))
- 7 Dave [((looks at Brenda
- 8 Dave ((points at Brenda, looks back at Dominic, then at Brenda, then

[illegible]



markers" – Sacks & Schegloff, 1979; for examples in hint-guess sequences in aphasic interaction see Goodwin, Goodwin & Olsher, 2002). Then Dominic offers a third gesture. Dave interprets this as flying, which would not be germane to the cycling item currently being pursued, and so he offers a correction (*No - we're on about cycling, not about flying, we're on about cycling* – see Schegloff, 1992 for a discussion of ways in which breaches, or alleged breaches, of sense or procedure are "repaired"). Dave does give Dominic his visual attention for about .8 of a second on completing this turn (line 24), but Dominic seems not to respond.

This type of interaction is similar to the 'hint and guess' sequences described in research on interactions involving people with aphasia (e.g. Goodwin, 1995, 2000; Lind, 2005; Laakso and Klippi 1999). However, while in these studies, the person with aphasia uses 'yes', 'no', and bodily movements to confirm or reject the guesses provided by their interactional partners, in this case Dominic does not confirm or deny the candidate words Dave is offering and so we are not sure whether Dave's suggestions are accepted. Responding to each word with a different gesture might mean the word was correct, the next gesture representing the next concept in the message, or it might mean the word was incorrect, in which case the next gesture might represent a second attempt, a type of gestural rephrasing (for examples of this see Goodwin, 2000; Lind, 2005). Given this uncertainty, the collaborative construction of meaning in this situation is rather difficult. A second point to note is that Dave, who treats the contribution as off-topic, does not take it up as a change in topic to be pursued, nor does he take it as Dominic offering an alternative activity to cycling (which might have altered the candidate words Dave suggested in response to the gestures – for an example of this in aphasic interaction see Goodwin, 2003). Rather, Dave rather shuts it down because there is business at hand, which is to go through the items on the meeting's agenda.

At this point (line 27 in the transcript above), presumably having concluded that Dom has nothing further to say on whatever issue concerns him (which is in any case apparently not relevant to the agenda item of cycling), Dave turns back to his minute book. In doing so, he does not see Dom's further attempt to point at Brenda, nor does he see Dom's final gesture, a circular hand movement. This gesture could be interpreted in a number of ways. It could be a reassertion: that, whatever it is he wants to say, it *is* connected to cycling. Or it could be an acknowledgement that Dom now appreciates that his reference to upstairs, or flying, was wrong, and that he now

understands that cycling is the issue. Either could have been receipted as intelligible contributions which make sense of his previously enigmatic turns. But as Dave is no longer looking, the opportunity to take up either possibility is missed.

Notice that Dominic's turns are in several ways well-designed. He produces a new gesture only after Dave has named the current one, thus piecing together an utterance jointly in a step-by-step fashion. Although Dave does give time for Dominic to elaborate while in clear view (see lines 7-21 above), it is not quite *enough* time. Inevitably, Dave must make a judgement about how long is long enough before he must return to the competing requirement of the meeting's agenda. As the chair of the meeting, his dilemma is ever-present.

#### *Episode 4: Dominic's thumbs- up approval*

This extract follows immediately from extract 3 (from which we reproduce the last three lines). Here we see Dominic make two conventional gestures ("thumbs up") that appear relevant to the business in hand.

Extract 4: VD03, 6.14 "Thumbs-up".

- 1        Dave    *((while looking at book))* Vic- (.) er::m, Henry a::nd (.5) *((turns*  
2                    *briefly to Oliver))* Oliver said they wanna go cycling w- once a  
3                    month, is that alright.=  
4        Henry    =yeah, month yeah:.  
5        Dave    yeah? *((nods))*  
6                    [                    (2.0 silence until line 11                    )  
7        Dave    [ *(( looks down at book ))*  
8    → Dom    [ *((puts thumbs up with both hands and pushes them forward*  
9    →            *emphatically over table, then drops hands down –Dave does*  
10 →            *not see it))* ]  
11        Dave    all enjoy(n) going *((looks up at Henry))* to the dis'bility sports  
12                    [club every:=  
13 → Dom    [ *((thumbs up with left hand towards Dave who does not see him))*  
14        Dave    =two weeks? (.) where we go and play footba::ll,  
15        Dave    [ *((makes batting(?) movement with pen)*  
16 → Dom    [ *((puts thumb down but keeps hand up near face))*

- 17 Dave snooker? (.) is that alright (( looks at Victor)) Victor? (.) football?  
 18 Victor yeah ((nods)).

Recall that the business in hand at this point is the round-robin check that everyone is happy with the arrangements to go cycling. We join at the point where Dave is summarising the position. He then looks to Henry for his opinion (line 2). Henry says *yeah, month, yeah*, which Dave receipts with a *yeah?* and a nod, then looks back down to his notes.

At this point, Dominic makes an emphatic exaggerated gesture of 'thumbs up' with both hands (see figure 2), stretching his arms across the table towards Dave, and giving a final 'kick' at their outwardmost extension. But Dave does not see this. Dominic then pulls his hands back and drops them under the table.

[----- figure 2 about here -----]

Note again that, from Dominic's point of view, the contribution is well-timed, coming after Dave's confirmation of Henry's positive response. The conventional 'thumbs up' gesture is semantically and pragmatically appropriate as some sort of echo or endorsement of Henry's positive evaluation of the cycling activity, or of Dave's successful receipt of it. Alternatively, it could be relevant not to the immediately contiguous material (Henry and Dave's exchange) but to the issue that may still be exercising Dominic from his own earlier unsatisfactory exchange with Dave. It might be an indication of his own positive evaluation of the notion of cycling. Since it is not noticed, however, it is not treated as either of these things, either of which would represent a substantial contribution.

A few lines later in the episode, Dave - unaware of Dominic's first thumbs-up - opens a new question to 'all' residents (*All enjoyed going to the disability sports club every two weeks*). Once again Dom signals 'thumbs up' (with just one hand this time). Again, this may be a direct response to Dave's question, or a reiteration of unfinished business, either to do with the exchange between Henry and Dave, or the earlier exchange between Dave and Dominic. However, although the gesture may be just within Dave's line of sight, it is not noticed and remains enigmatic.

*Episode 5: Dom's objection to an activity*

In this extract, Dave is soliciting views on the activity of going to the cinema. At the same time, one of the residents, Alec, is addressing questions to Chris on the previous topic discussed, which was holidays (e.g. ‘*where’s France?*’). Note what happens and line 7, where Dominic makes a contribution.

Extract 5: VD03, 7.10 "Cinema"

- 1        Dave    Cinema? *((turns sharply to Alec))*
- 2                (.4)
- 3        Alec    (ehah)
- 4        Dave    still wanna go to the cinema,
- 5        Alec    (I do yeah) [where’s France
- 6        Dave                *[((turns back to look down at book))*
- 7        Dave                [I think you’ve been about [three times,
- 8 → Dom                *[((slight shake of head))*
- 9        Dave    four times. (.) *((Looks at Victor))* Club [Victor?
- 10       Victor                                *[((nods))*
- 11                [                1 sec of silence till line 16                ]
- 12       Dave    *[((nods and writes in book))*
- 13 → Dom    *[((looks at Victor and makes shaking movement with both*
- 14                *hands, palms down, as if refusing, just above table. Dave*
- 15                *doesn’t see)).*
- 16       Victor    *((nods at same time – glances at Dom))*
- 17       Alec    *((looking at Chris))* will there [be coach:es.
- 18       Dave                                [Still enjoying that.

As with the extracts above, Dom produces a repeated gesture which goes unnoticed. We might consider how it could reasonably have been treated at the time. The first brief head shake could have been a objection to the activity proposed to fellow-resident Alec, either from Dominic's own point of view, or perhaps on Alec's behalf. But when Dominic repeats the gesture more emphatically, with hand-movements, Dave is now talking to Victor. Again it might be an objection to the activity proposed to Victor, from Dominic or Victor's point of view. Once more we see Dom making a potentially significant contribution (objecting to something either

for his own part, or on behalf of others) at an appropriate place in the interaction. If it were treated in these ways, Dominic would be seen trying to influence Victor and Alec (not to go to the club) or the staff (not to take them), or as someone who dislikes the club and is stating his own preference. All autonomous, empowered activities, but all unrealized in this instance.

*Episode 6: Dom summons Henry*

In the extract below we see Dom using gesture for a different purpose – that of calling another resident to attention. Dave has been going around the group asking each person whether they want to go to a particular club where there is music and drinking. We join them as Dave is half-way through asking Dom if he wants to go. Alec is again participating in a different conversation to the one that Dom, Henry and Dave are engaged in. His questions are directed at Chris.

Extract 6: 8.55 "Music, drinking"

- 1 Dave ((to Dom)) Music (.) drinking (.) ((one hand makes drinking
- 2 gesture)).
- 3 (.3)
- 4 Dom [((nods and makes quick drink movement/pointing)).
- 5 Alec [((to Chris)) ( Chris you- ) Chris (you doin' it?)
- 6 Dave ((turns to Henry and points to him, drops hand quickly)) Henry,
- 7 Henry ((does not react - drinking from cup, looking into it, not looking
- 8 at Dave – appears not to have have heard his name))
- 9 → Dom [((brings hand up above table and points at Henry))
- 10 Alec [((to Chris)) play darts
- 11 Henry ((looks up at Dave and puts cup down))
- 12 Dave do you want to go tomorrow night?
- 13 Henry ((nods))

(----- insert Fig 3 about here -----)

When Dave says 'Henry', looks and briefly points at him, Henry is drinking from a plastic cup and is not looking at Dave. There is a short pause, during which Alec continues to talk to Chris. Dom, who is sitting next to Henry, points at Henry.

Note that this pointing occurs after Dave has used Henry's name to gain his attention, and after Dave has also pointed briefly at him. Henry, who is looking into his cup and drinking, has not replied. Viewed sequentially, we could see it as a repeated indication (though a non-verbal one) of who is to speak next. After Dom points at him, Henry looks up at Dave, who finishes the question. Whether or not Henry's attention was attracted by Dom's pointing is unclear, but where it was placed, and its potential function, appear to be competently designed as part of the interaction. If Dom's contribution is registered, we see him acting in terms of a facilitator, both helping Henry by alerting him that he has been called to speak, and aiding in the smooth progress of the meeting.

*Episode 7: Dom's gesture acknowledged: Guinness man*

We end with an episode that, unlike most of the others, does indeed show a staff member reacting to a gesture. This demonstrates how rich implications can be drawn from such contributions, if they are noticed and ratified. It comes during a stretch when Dave is asking each resident in turn whether they are still going to the sports club and doing different activities there. He uses gestures to indicate several of the activities he is asking about.

Extract 7: 6.30: "Guinness man"

- 1        Dave    Oliver, (1.5) *((leans towards and looks at him))* are you still
- 2                doing the *((moves hand in grasping/ pushing gesture))*
- 3                [curling, (.) yeah?
- 4        Alec    [d'you like football Chris?
- 5                (1.0)
- 6        Dave    *((turns to Alec))* Alec, [(.) you                [still doing the
- 7        Alec                                *((looks at Dave))*    [ehye::ah
- 8        Dave    curling? *((makes back-handed sweeping movement))*
- 9        Dave    yeah?
- 10                (.8) *((Dave turns to Dom))*
- 11        Dave    a'you still doing *((points at Dom))* the basketball *((makes*
- 12                *patting movement then points at Dom again))* (.5) and football?
- 13                *((makes back-hand bat, fingers pointing down, then points at Dom))*
- 14                [                3 secs of silence unti line 21                ]

- 15 → Dom [ *((points at Chris and looks at him))*.  
 16 Alec *((looks at Chris))*  
 17 Dave *((looks at Chris))*  
 18 Dom *((drops hand, still looking at Chris))*  
 19 Dave *((looks back at Dom))*  
 20 → Dom *((quickly points at Chris again, still looking at Chris))*  
 21 Alec *((to Chris))* you doin-, you doin' it?  
 22 Dave *((looks at Chris again then back at Dom))*  
 23 Dave [ *((points at Chris))* you wannu go with Chris:?  
 24 Dom [ *((looks at Dave))*  
 25 Alec (friday is it).  
 26 Dave Friday night. *((points at Chris and nods))*  
 27 Dave Perhaps Chris will come one Friday night.  
 28 [ 2 secs of near silence until line 32 ]  
 29 Dom *((still looking at Dave makes pulling movement (like operating*  
 30 *a beer pump) then lifts one thumb to point at Dave))*  
 31 Chris *((quiet laugh))*  
 32 Dave and the pub, yeah, I haven't got to [the pub- *((smiley voice))*  
 33 Alec [( ).  
 34 Dave I haven't got to the pub yet.  
 35 Chris >°(I:'ll) go to the pub°<.  
 36 Brenda *((laughs quietly))* Guinness ma:n.

When he gets to Dom, Dave asks if he is still doing football and basketball. Dom produces a response that appears off-topic. He points at Chris. Instead of dismissing this as irrelevant as he did in extract three, Dave now attempts to make it relevant to the outing in question by asking 'Do you want to go with Chris'.

As in extract 3, Dom does not explicitly confirm or deny Dave's candidate understanding, but instead makes a gesture that Dave interprets as indicating the pub. The gesture is acknowledged by Dave, Chris treats it as an invitation, which he accepts, and Brenda bestows the identity of *Guinness Man* on Dominic. Here we see the potential when non-verbal gestures are acknowledged, and how meaning is produced jointly between the staff and residents (Beamer & Brooks, 2001; Edge,

2001; Harris, 2003). Dominic's gestures are treated as meaningful, and in the process he is treated as having particular identities (as contributing meaningfully to the topic, as host, as Guinness man). In addition, as in all the extracts above, Dom's contributions are placed appropriately in the interaction in transition relevant places. In the first case, in response to Dave's question, in the second as a further suggestion/invitation (the pub) after Dave has confirmed Chris might come on Friday.

### Discussion

Our aim in this article was to throw the spotlight on the kind of subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) gestures that a person with intellectual disabilities might use (as anyone might) to make a point during a meeting. We showed an occasion where the gestures were registered by the staff members in the meeting and made consequential (extract 7); but we showed six other occasions on which gestures were not seen or registered. In each of those misfiring occasions, good sense might have been made of the resident's performance if the gestures had been responded to and clarified. These examples provide evidence for recommendations made elsewhere that staff working in services for people with intellectual disabilities should become more aware of, and responsive to, non-verbal behaviours (e.g. Houghton et al, 1987; McConkey et al, 1999).

First a word on interactional competence. Conversation analysts use the term 'intersubjectivity' to refer to the way interactants display their understanding to each other and how they orient to the shared activity in which they are engaged (see the discussion in Heritage, 1984, especially pp 254-60; for a discussion of this in relation to intellectual disability, see Goode, 1994). What we find here is no different. The unacknowledged gestures we record display an orientation to the topic or question at hand, and represent potentially helpful or self-determined contributions (for a discussion of unacknowledged competence with respect to verbal communication see Rapley, 2004). In addition, they are often placed at appropriate points in the interaction, in just the way spoken contributions might be. We are not suggesting that contributions are not also missed in meetings involving people without disabilities; both verbal and non-verbal contributions are no doubt missed in any meeting involving multiple participants. However, it is particularly important to acknowledge and attempt to ameliorate this in meetings involving people with communication difficulties or who are less verbally assertive. Indeed, the aim of encouraging



citizenship and self-advocacy means that not only is it essential to be sensitive to every potential type of communication, but we must also recognize how different forums for participation (such as formal meetings) have in-built biases towards certain forms of communication. Remaining vigilant to the type of gestures described here is particularly important given suggestions that some people with intellectual disabilities (e.g. Down's syndrome) have particular problems in word articulation, and thus in producing easily intelligible speech (Dodd & Thompson, 2001; Mundy, Sigman, Kasari & Yirmiya, 1988; Rondal & Edwards, 1997).

It is useful to contrast the way in which Dominic's gestures are treated here to the examples of gestures in Goodwin's work on aphasia (1995, 2000). While Goodwin illustrated the variety of ways (using intonation, gaze, body posture and gesture) in which a man with aphasia confirmed or rejected 'guessing sequences' of his interactional partners in order to arrive at an agreed meaning, this was not quite so clear in our data. One problem of pointing as a gesture is that it can be understood in multiple ways, both in terms of locations and objects indicated as well as the activities implied by these objects/locations (Goodwin, 2003). When his gestures are noticed by Dave (extract 3) and candidate suggestions offered, Dominic tended to move on the next gesture.

The dilemma here for the staff member is whether to interpret these subsequent gestures as rephrasings of the previous gestures (indicating his guess at the word was wrong) or as the next meaning units in the interaction (indicating his previous guess was more or less adequate). Dominic does not orient to Dave's problems because he neither provides third position repairs (Schegloff, 1992) nor explicit confirmations (nods/'yes'). There is a clear problem in recipient design (e.g. Wootton, 1989), that is, tailoring one's interventions to the circumstances of a given interlocutor. One suggestion to tackle this problem would be for staff to make Dominic aware of their difficulties in piecing together meaning with him by asking questions more specifically rather than providing single words – for example, they might ask 'Do you mean Brenda?' rather than just offering the word 'Brenda'.

A second point of contrast with Goodwin's data is that these unnoticed gestures are often not preceded by any call to attention. In this way they differ from the examples in, for example, Goodwin et al (2002) in which a summons-answer sequence is used before the aphasic man produces a further gesture or vocalisation (for examples in children's interaction see Ochs, Schieffelin, Platt, 1979). In

Goodwin's example, the summons is used to gain the gaze of a hearer before the gesture begins, and often involves prosodic features of 'nonsense syllables' together with particular gaze/body configurations. In most of the examples here, however, this does not occur. This might indicate that the gestures are not designed to affect the course of the interaction, being designed instead as asides or, in Goffman's terms, 'response cries' (Goffman, 1981). In other cases, such as in extract one where Henry moves his glasses right in front of Dave and then holds them up, or when Dom points at Henry when he does not respond, this seems less likely. However, in both these cases, not calling attention to their contributions when these are 'out of turn' seems to display a sensitivity to the 'business at hand', the formal procedure of the meeting. By not demanding attention, their contributions do not usurp the trajectory of the meeting – they are there to be picked up on if Dave or another person wishes, but they do not demand to be noticed. This sensitivity reveals a delicate procedural competence amongst the group members which we would have missed if we had not looked carefully at the details of non-verbal contributions in their context.

There are two complementary ways of explaining how many of these potential contributions were either not responded to or simply went unnoticed. One is that staff may be attuned to the vocal register. Many of the contributions described here were not accompanied by calls to attention which "actively work to secure the orientation of a hearer" (Goodwin, 2000, p1499). This puts a particular onus on the other people present to be vigilant to such silent, and unassertive, contributions. The other explanation is that the staff face a dilemma (Houghton et al, 1987; McConkey et al, 1999). If a resident's gesture is only vaguely noted or has a meaning that is difficult to discern, then the staff member must calculate the costs and benefits of pursuing it until its meaning and relevance are clear, or, conversely, pressing on with the matter in hand (i.e. addressing each agenda item and recording decisions). Pursuing gestural contributions can be time-consuming and the outcome debatable: we often observed staff make repeated attempts to clarify their meaning, particularly when the candidate words suggested by members of staff were not clearly accepted or rejected. In other cases part of the contribution was neglected and only the clearest sign taken up (e.g. a pointing gesture).

This study has important implications for how we understand the identities of the actors in these settings. The impression one would get if one were to analyse the vocal transcript of these interactions is that, except for one resident who regularly

initiated verbal interactions (Alec), the other residents were present only when addressed directly by the staff and prompted towards making a reply. We would find people lacking in spontaneity and agency, able only to format communications and participate in interactions once lead by someone more able. Just as Goode (1994) found that formal assessments of communication were too limited to provide a picture of the real-world interactional abilities of the deaf-blind children in his study, a reliance on the verbal record here would have produced a version of the residents as reactive, autonomous only when asked direct questions. However, looking at non-verbal behaviour provides a different picture of their identities in this context; it shows the residents as spontaneous, autonomous and as having a delicate sensitivity to the procedural aspects of the meeting. The examples here, then, provide further illustrations of the social model of disability (e.g. Goodley, 2000; Oliver, 1990), which attempts to show how people are disabled by the ways in which the social environment is structured and institutions go about their business. Conducting meetings in such a way that they are not sensitive to non-verbal contributions, and in which there is a pressure to overlook 'out of turn' contributions, in effect disables people by insisting that they contribute in ways that may be difficult for them. Not only is incompetence produced by the way in which the meeting is organised, but further obstacles are put in the way of participation and self-determination. A clear recommendation from this study is that meetings need to be structured differently, so that deviations from the procedure are welcomed and non-verbal contributions noticed. Having a second member of staff at the meeting whose role is to watch for these would be useful.

There is a more general point here concerning language and identities as they are studied in the social sciences. There is a disciplinary emphasis on describing or extrapolating identities from written or spoken data (questionnaires, interviews, talk-in-interaction), partly because language is the tool of the analyst for describing their ideas and findings, and partly because it is the easiest method of data collection. But this presents a problem for how we should understand the notion of identity for those with limited access to language. The cumulative impression one might get from research on identity in the social sciences is that identity is only found in language – to a certain extent, lacking a vocabulary, at least for the analyst, means lacking an identity. However, following Goode's (1994) discussion of identity in his study of deaf-blind children, if we conceive of identity as something that can be seen in how

people treat one another (for example in positioning theory and in conversation analysis), without dealing with the question of what people actually think of themselves or others, then more potential is opened up for understanding identities as things that are interactionally significant. But we must not then carry over the tendency to rely on verbal language. To expand the possibilities even further for those without language we must attend to what goes on non-verbally – and notice both those contributions that become interactionally salient as well as those that do not.

When we notice these silent contributions a different picture of identity emerges. Admittedly these are often not identities that become interactionally salient for the other actors at the time. Rather these contributions can be seen as the basis for *potential* identities. The contributions we observed here are often much richer than their translation by the staff into language. They are there for the taking, and if taken in their complexity, give a different picture of the residents. They are assertions, evaluations, jokes and prosocial behaviours that if responded to would result in interactional identities that are more autonomous and self-directed; identities that might be available and ascribed to actors in more relaxed social contexts, in which there is not the same emphasis on achieving interactional business. It is worth therefore sounding a cautionary note with regard to context. An analysis of programme planning meetings yields only a partial account of the identities available to the residents across the scope of their regular activities and interactions.

Where members of staff are not focused on achieving institutional business and efficiently managing meetings they can, and do expend greater effort in discerning the meanings of ambiguous utterances or signs. One example from the ethnographic record of this research illustrates this point. One day, seemingly out of the blue, Alec informed Kath (the home manager) that he was scared of falling in the airport and was likely to cry. After considerable effort, Kath was able to establish that Alec did not want to fly to Spain this year but preferred to holiday in the UK; a choice ratified at subsequent programme planning meetings. Though self-advocacy and programme meetings are important locations for choice and the production of empowered identities, in order to enact truly person-centred practices, staff in services must remain alert to choice and identity as ongoing interactional concerns and remain flexible in their practices in order to engage with them wherever and whenever they might arise.

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## Appendix

*Transcription Symbols*

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(.3), (2.6)	Examples of timed pauses
word [word	
[word	The start of overlapping talk.
.hh, hh	In-breath (note the preceding full stop) and out-breath respectively.
wo(h)rd	(h) shows that the word has "laughter" bubbling within it
wor-	A dash shows a sharp cut-off
wo:rd	Colons show that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound.
(words)	A guess at what might have been said if unclear
( )	Very unclear talk.
word=	
=word	No discernible pause between two sounds or turns at talk
w <u>o</u> rd, W <u>O</u> RD	Underlined sounds are louder, capitals louder still
°word°	Material between "degree signs" is quiet
>word word<	Faster speech
<word word>	Slower speech
→	Analyst's signal of a significant line
((sobbing))	Attempt at representing something hard, or impossible, to write phonetically

Figure 1. Basic disposition of staff and residents around the table.

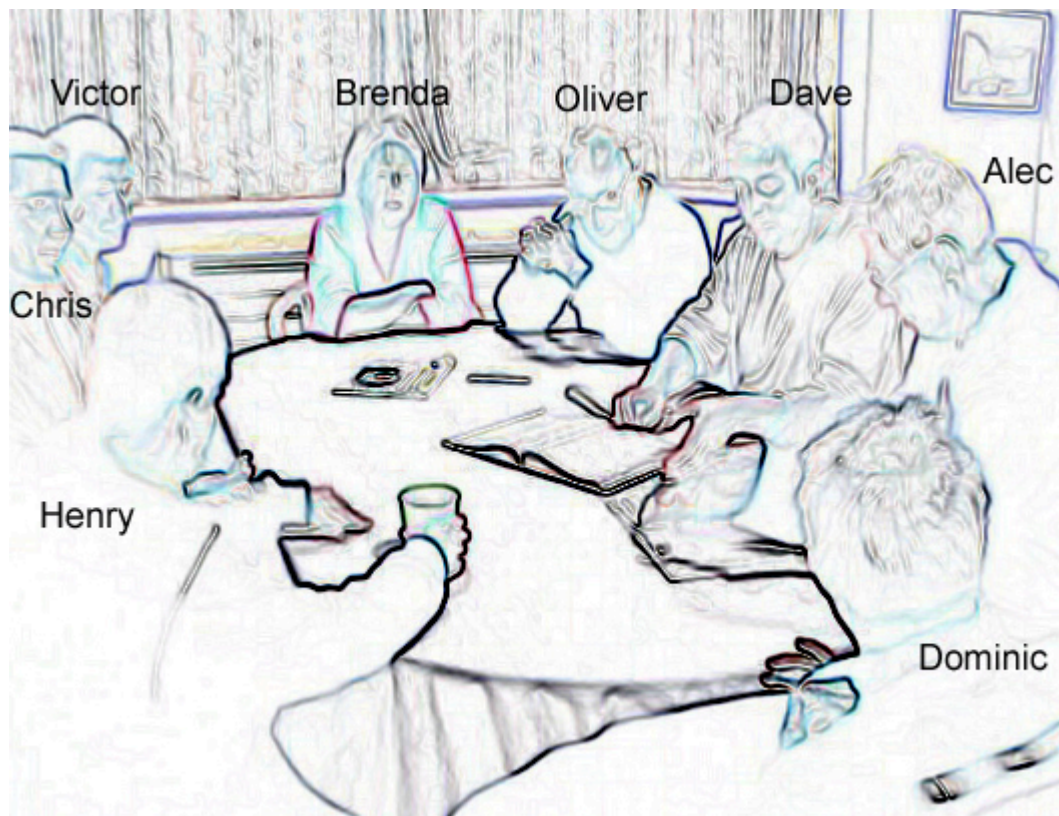


Figure 2: Dominic makes an emphatic thumbs-up gesture with both hands (see extract 4). Dashed lines show direction of gaze.



Figure 3: Dominic points at Henry (see extract 6). Dashed line shows direction of gaze.

